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ABSTRACT

Students explore concepts of Progressive Era education and learn how the philanthropic efforts of Pierre Samuel du Pont helped transform Delaware's education system for African American school children. It is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration file "Iron Hill School Number 112C," interviews with former pupils, and other source materials. This lesson can be used in teaching units on the Progressive Era, or on the themes of segregation, education, and the evolution of civil rights for African Americans in the first part of the 20th century. Objectives for students are: (1) to consider the impact segregation had on the quality of education available to African Americans; (2) to explain education concepts of the Progressive Era that were incorporated into African-American schools in Delaware; (3) to examine the motives and results of Pierre Samuel du Pont's philanthropic efforts on behalf of Delaware's African-American school children; and (4) to discover the history of their own school. Materials available for student use are a map of Delaware, three readings about du Pont's contribution and Progressive Era school architecture, three photos of Iron Hill School and an African-American school in Louisiana, a floor plan of the Iron Hill School, and a 1919 advertisement for school equipment. The lesson is divided into the following teaching activity sections: (1) "Setting the Stage: Maps"; (2) "Determining the Facts: Readings"; (3) "Visual Evidence: Images"; and (3) "Putting It All Together: Activities." (BT)

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Teaching with Historic Places

Iron Hill School: An African-American One-Room School

Teaching with Historic Places
National Register of Historic Places
National Park Service
1849 C. Street, NW., Suite NC400
Washington, D.C. 20240

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Iron Hill School:
An African-American One-Room School

"I wonder how she did it. Looking back, I really do. I remember her taking time with each class. As I remember, she got the younger children started on a project, maybe painting or going over our ABCs or our numbers. Then she would go on to the next class and get them started. We were all kind of getting started and busy. Then she went to the older children. She spent maybe a little more time with them because their lessons were a little more complicated. Then she would come back to us. But we knew that her eyes were on us and we kept busy. By the time she came back we tried to have our work done, at least I did....And that's how I remember her accomplishing her teaching."

– Rebecca Freeman, former student at Iron Hill School

Iron Hill School, constructed in 1923 in a rural area of northern Delaware, was one of more than 80 schools for African-American children built between 1919 and 1928 as part of philanthropist Pierre Samuel du Pont's "Delaware experiment." Though small and modest, these school buildings incorporated the latest design concepts in Progressive era education.

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About This Lesson

In this lesson, students explore concepts of Progressive Era education, and learn how the philanthropic efforts of Pierre Samuel du Pont helped transform Delaware's education system for African-American school children. It is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration file "Iron Hill School Number 112C," interviews with former pupils, and other source materials. The lesson was written by Susan Brizzolara Wojcik, Historic Preservation Planner, New Castle County Department of Land Use.

Where it fits into the curriculum

Topics: This lesson could be used in teaching units on the Progressive Era, or on the themes of segregation, education, and the evolution of civil rights for African Americans in the first part of the 20th century.

Time period: 1919-1954

Objectives for students

1) To consider the impact segregation had on the quality of education available to African Americans.

2) To explain education concepts of the Progressive Era that were incorporated into African-American schools in Delaware.

3) To examine the motives and results of Pierre Samuel du Pont's philanthropic efforts on behalf of Delaware's African-American school children.

4) To discover the history of their own school.

Materials for students

The materials listed below either can be used directly on the computer or can be printed out, photocopied and distributed to students. The map, photographs, floor plan, and advertisement appear twice: in a low-resolution version with associated questions and alone in a larger, high-resolution version.

1) a map of Delaware;

2) three readings about du Pont's contribution and Progressive school architecture;

3) three photos of Iron Hill School and an African-American school in Louisiana;

4) a floor plan of the Iron Hill School;

5) a 1919 advertisement for school equipment.

Visiting the Site

The Iron Hill School is owned and operated by the Delaware Academy of Science, Inc., as the Iron Hill Museum of Natural History. The museum is located at 1355 Old Baltimore Pike, south of Newark. For museum hours and days of operation, call (302) 368-5703.

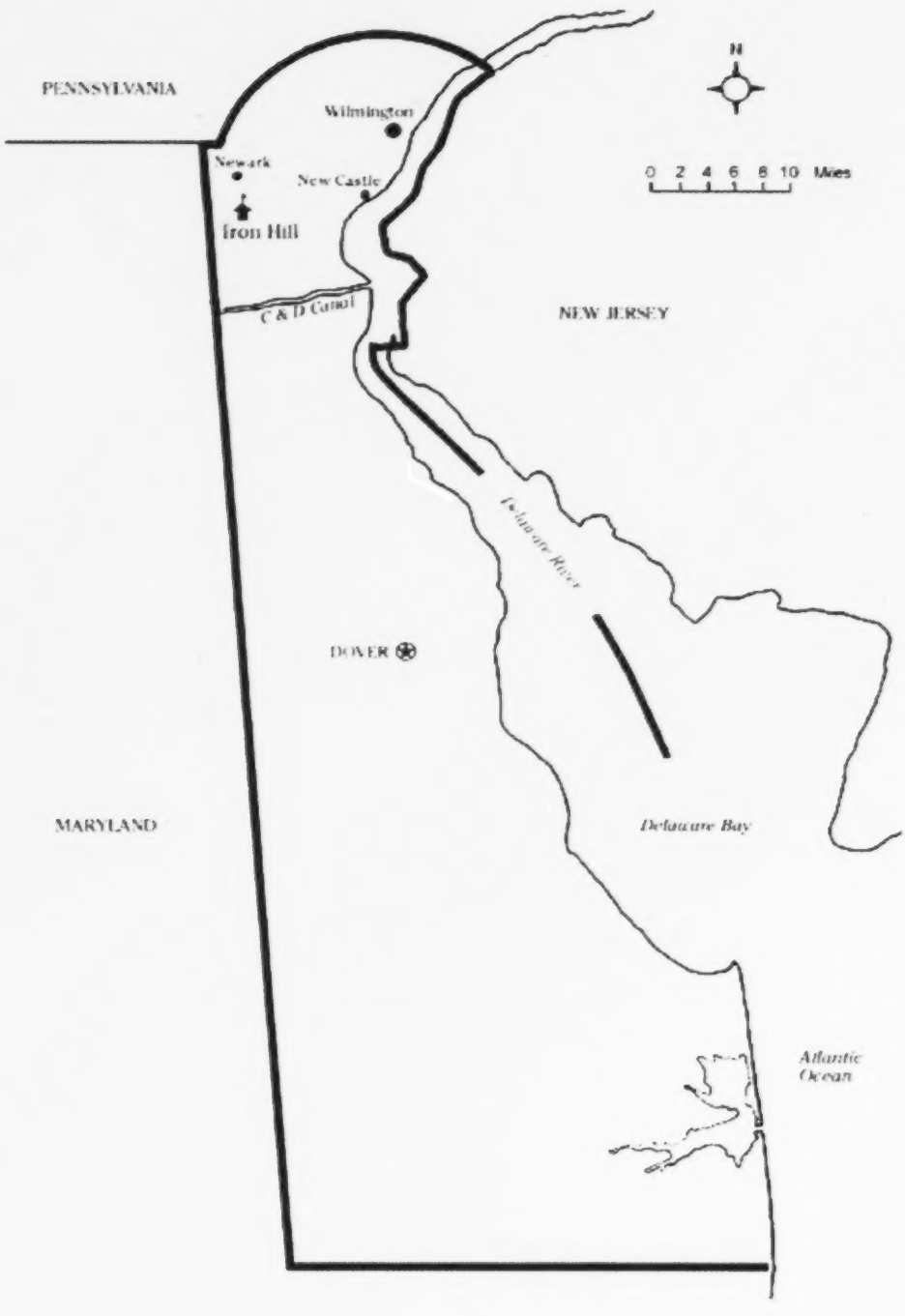
Teaching Activities

Setting the Stage

Explain to students that, like other border and southern states, Delaware practiced racial segregation well into the 20th century. Segregation restricted African Americans' access to railroad cars, hotels, theaters, and public buildings. African-American children suffered by having to attend separate schools with inferior materials and equipment. Prior to the Civil War, schools established by private organizations provided the few educational opportunities for the state's African-American children. In 1875 the Delaware state legislature first recognized the need to financially support schools for African Americans. This funding, provided by property taxes collected from African-American males, proved inadequate and the school facilities continued to be inferior to those in the white districts. In 1897, in response to the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court ruling, the legislature began to require that state funds be distributed equally among schools for whites and African Americans. School districts still partially depended on property taxes, however, so African-American schools continued to receive less money than white schools.

Concerned about the poor condition of Delaware's public schools, including those for African-American students, philanthropist Pierre Samuel du Pont decided to donate money to have schools in the state rebuilt. More than 80 African-American schools were constructed with du Pont funding between1919 and 1928.

Teaching Activities - Locating the Site
Map 1: Delaware



Although it is only 334 feet high, Iron Hill is the highest hill in Delaware. Composed of beds of iron ore, which produce rich soil and lush vegetation, this rural area was well-suited to both farming and mining. It was the children of mining and farming families, largely African Americans, who attended the schools in the area. By the late 1870s a school for African Americans had been built at Iron Hill, but records show that attendance was low despite a fairly large African-American population. In 1904, a modest new school was constructed, but was falling into disrepair by the 1920s. In 1923, du Pont funding was used to build a new school for the Iron Hill community.

1) Delaware was referred to as a border state during the Civil War. What does this mean? How do you think being a border state may have affected the state's practices and attitudes toward African Americans after the Civil War?

2) Locate the Iron Hill School. Why might attendance have been low prior to 1923?

Teaching Activities--Determining the Facts

Reading 1: Pierre Samuel du Pont and Delaware's African-American Schools

The early 20th century in America, a period characterized by nationwide social reform, is often referred to as the Progressive Era. During this period, more and more people recognized that education was the best guarantee of economic success for young people. Delaware's educators were eager to reform their schools, which were often old, too small, and in very poor condition. In fact, according to a 1915 federal study of the quality of education in the states, Delaware ranked in 39th place out of the then 48 states. Reforms were interrupted by the country's involvement in World War I, but in 1919 Delaware adopted a new school code. Among other changes, the code established that schools for African Americans would receive some of the money collected from white taxpayers. The new school code also supported the rebuilding of schools for white students. There was no provision for rebuilding schools for African-American children, however. Concerned about the condition of education in Delaware, philanthropist Pierre Samuel d u Pont decided to help pay to have schools in the state rebuilt.

Pierre Samuel du Pont was a member of the family that established the Du Pont Company in the early 19th century in Wilmington, Delaware. Located on the banks of the Brandywine River, which powered mills that manufactured gun powder, the company became a world leader in the explosives industry. In 1919, du Pont resigned as president of the family business and began devoting much of his time to the cause of education, including serving on the State Board of Education. Using his own money, du Pont established a two-million dollar trust fund for remodeling existing school buildings and constructing new ones in Delaware. He designated a substantial amount of that money to build new schools for African-American children.

According to Delaware's new school code, African-American children were subject to mandatory attendance laws requiring all children under age 14 to attend school during the 180-day school year. It was demonstrated through a survey of the place of residence of every African-American child in Delaware that many of the existing schools were inconveniently located. Establishing several, small, single-teacher schools close to centers of population was considered the best solution to address scattered populations and low attendance records. This also would help address the concerns of parents who depended on their children's labor for economic support.

Between 1919 and 1928 du Pont personally financed the construction of more than 80 schools for African Americans. By 1938, after many of the schools for whites and all the schools for African Americans had been rebuilt, Delaware had advanced to eighth place out of the 48 states in terms of the quality of its public education system. In 1926, when asked by the editor of Afro-American Magazine why he had funded these schools, du Pont replied:

> If the Delaware experiment proves satisfactory, which I am sure it will, it will be a great incentive to go ahead more quickly in other States....The progress of Delaware schools will bear watching, for on their success must hang the fate of Negro

public school education in the United States for many years.1

1Pierre S. du Pont to Carl Murphy, March 1, 1926, Pierre S. du Pont Papers, Longwood Manuscripts, Group 10, Series A, File 712, Box 3 (Hagley Museum and Library,Wilmington, Delaware).

1. What were some of the provisions of the 1919 Delaware school code?

2. How did Delaware officials plan to deal with scattered population and low attendance at African-American schools? Do you think this was a reasonable solution? Why or why not?

3. Who was Pierre Samuel du Pont and why did he undertake what he called the "Delaware experiment"? Can the benefits of du Pont's gift be measured? If so, how?

Reading 1 was adapted from Susan Brizzolara Wojcik, "Iron Hill School Number 112C," (New Castle County, Delaware) National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1995; and from the Papers of Pierre Samuel du Pont (Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library).

Teaching Activities--Determining the Facts

Reading 2: Progressive School Architecture

A popular belief of the Progressive Era, and one shared by Pierre Samuel du Pont, was that a well-designed school building improved the overall quality of education received by students. Therefore, du Pont wanted to hire the best architect possible for the important work of improving Delaware's education system. He believed that "a school is a highly specialized type of building," and "experimenting with an architect who is not familiar with the latest ideas on school administration, design and construction is likely to prove very costly."2 To accomplish his goals, he hired James Oscar Betelle, a nationally-known architect of schools.

In 1920, Betelle wrote an essay entitled "New School Buildings, State of Delaware." In the article he described progressive architecture as a way to create better classrooms so that children would receive a better education. Betelle explained:

> The school building program now in progress throughout the State of Delaware is at once the most interesting and probably the most important that has ever been undertaken by any State...nearly all of the school buildings are obsolete and in many cases a menace to the health and safety of the children....It is therefore possible to wipe the slate clean and make a new start. This means that the State will now have what almost amounts to an entirely new school building equipment, located and constructed along most modern lines. The more progressive citizens of the State have long realized that the course of studies and the buildings in which these studies were being taught did not measure up to modern educational requirements....
>
> There will necessarily be a number of very small schools for the colored children, as the colored population in Delaware is scattered in small communities. The colored children will have schools of their own, but there will be no difference in design or construction between the buildings for white children and the buildings for the colored children....
>
> The small rural school is not as simple a problem as it might at first glance seem....From the standpoint of first cost it was possible with the funds available to place the very best systems of heating, running water for drinking purposes, and the installation of water closets. It was not this first cost, however, that was the deciding factor, but the attention and expense that was necessary for proper maintenance after the systems had

been installed....After much consideration and investigation it was decided to install chemical toilet fixtures to be reached through the coat rooms inside the small buildings. For the water supply system it was further decided to install a hand pump over a sink in the work room...For heating, a jacketed stove located in an alcove or a furnace placed in a small room outside of the class room was decided upon. It is realized that the jacketed stove will heat and ventilate the class room with considerably less coal than the furnace....A stove in the class room with the attending noise, confusion and dust caused by the putting on of coal and the removal of ashes is very much of a handicap to good instruction work....

The community use of these small schools has always been kept in mind. The class rooms will be fitted with movable desks which can be placed around the walls and the center of the room thus left clear for community meetings or dances....

Everything possible will be done to construct the building in such a way that the maintenance cost can be kept down to the minimum, and when completed, the school will be finished in every way, including the landscape work, walks, drives, etc.

Betelle made some very specific recommendations regarding classroom size and design, which followed national standards of the period. The recommended size for a classroom for 40 students was approximately 24 feet wide by 32 feet long. Natural light was considered one of the most important factors for a new school. The standards called for the natural light source to be unilateral (meaning one-sided), and to come from the pupils' left side as they sat in their chairs facing the teacher in the front of the classroom. The light would be provided by a bank of windows filling the wall and rising almost to the ceiling. To avoid too much light and glare at the front of the classroom, the windows would stop at least seven feet from the corner with the front wall. The building would be placed on its lot so that the light would not come through the bank of windows directly from the north or south.

Furthermore, every room would have a closet for the storage of books and supplies. The blackboards would hang at the front of the room and on the wall opposite the windows. Seats would be moveable and adjustable. Room would be provided to hang hats and coats. The recommendations also specified play equipment, and a place to prepare hot lunches.

2Pierre S. du Pont to Board of Education, October 15, 1932, Pierre S. du Pont Papers, Longwood Manuscripts, Group 10, Series A, File 712, Box 5 (Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware).

1. Why did du Pont want to hire a nationally-known architect of schools?

2. Why was it necessary to provide several small schools for African Americans rather than fewer, larger schools?

3. Why did Betelle decide not to recommend that the very best systems of heating, running water, and toilets be installed?

4. Betelle wrote that "the community use of these small schools has always been kept in mind." What community functions could the building serve? Is your school also used for community purposes? If so, what are they?

5. What are some of the features and furnishings of progressive architecture described in the reading? Why do you think these features were considered progressive at the time?

Reading 2 was adapted from James Oscar Betelle, "New School Buildings, State of Delaware," American Architect 117 (June 1920): 751-788; James Oscar Betelle, "Architectural Styles as Applied to School Buildings," The American School Board Journal 58 (April 1919): 75-76; and two reports containing the standards for progressive schools, George D. Strayer, N.L. Engelhardt, and F.W. Hart, General Report on School Buildings and Grounds of Delaware (Wilmington, Delaware: Service Citizens of Delaware, 1919); and Report and Recommendations on Certain School Buildings in Delaware (Wilmington, Delaware: Service Citizens of Delaware, 1919).

Teaching Activities--Determining the Facts

Reading 3: Memories of Former Iron Hill School Students

The program to provide every African-American school district in Delaware with a modern building using du Pont funds was completed in 1928. On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. The Board of Education ended racial segregation. The integration process was slow in Delaware and desegregation in public schools was not completed until the State Board of Education adopted a resolution in February 1965. The resolution called for the dissolution of some African-American schools, including Iron Hill, by September 1965.

Pierre du Pont's contribution to the improvement of African-American education in Delaware was warmly acknowledged through hundreds of letters from students and teachers across the state. Following are excerpts from oral history interviews conducted in 1995 with former Iron Hill School students:

Iron Hill School's Progressive Elements

> I thought it was just wonderful, beautiful. I think I had...gratitude towards Mr. du Pont beyond the architecture. The thought that he would build black people such a building....There's always a soft spot in my heart for the du Pont family, the good that they have done, and Pierre S. du Pont was the one....I just was elated at the building, but I think I was always thinking of how wonderful it was that he gave it to us.
> --Dorothy Copper

> There were lights and we had shades to the windows....It was always clean, the building was always clean, bright, and cheerful....I never remember having trouble seeing because the shades were adjustable. On cloudy days maybe they were all the way up so you would have more light.
> --Rebecca Freeman

> I can remember what I would call a pot belly stove, a big furnace, used for heating and also used sometimes for heating our hot lunches....The stove was cast iron.... We had to be awfully careful going up and putting the pots we were going to cook on top of the stove....It would be awful cold, and when it got cold out it would take a lot of coal to heat this building....The coldest part was over there by the windows because these windows used to push out. The big kids would be over there and the smaller kids would be next to the fire.
> --Reverend Allen O. Smith

> I think, when I first began, I remember the stove. As time went on it seems like there was a heater there....I don't know that it worked all the time, but there was, I believe, a heater there, a furnace....We also sometimes prepared special meals there. The teacher would let the older children themselves prepare meals there, a pot of soup or something someone

had sent in for us to have a hot meal for the day....It was a big pot belly stove--it got really hot, but you could set a pot on the top.
--Rebecca Freeman

Structure and Activities of the Day

Our teacher would have a bell, she was right there on the steps, and would ring the bell, and we all would come in and we would go to our respective areas. Then we would have a song...and we sang, oh, something appropriate.... And then we would have the scripture. The scripture would be read and then we would pledge allegiance to the flag, and then our teacher would give us our prayer, she would pray for us today, and then...our classes would begin....
--Reverend Allen O. Smith

I wonder how she did it. Looking back, I really do. I remember her taking time with each class. As I remember, she got the younger children started on a project, maybe painting or going over our ABCs or our numbers. Then she would go on to the next class and get them started. We were all kind of getting started and busy. Then she went to the older children. She spent maybe a little more time with them because their lessons were a little more complicated. Then she would come back to us. But we knew that her eyes were on us and we kept busy. By the time she came back we tried to have our work done, at least I did....And that's how I remember her accomplishing her teaching.
--Rebecca Freeman

We had different days. We had a musical period. In fact we had flutes. We were supplied flutes by the State Board of Education. And we had music sessions, would take lessons on maybe a Monday or Wednesday. And then we had an art class. We had to do an art drawing and all that, and we didn't have gym because we did it out on the playground. Our gym class, what we call gym now, would be held on the playground.
--Reverend Allen O. Smith

We used to have...[what] we called May Day....Three schools who used to come together...for a day of fun playing and we had competition. We had teams, some would be on the blue team and some on the red team. We had different contests, like volley ball, dodge ball, fifty-yard dash, and ...a bag race.... We had different sorts of activities...and our parents would make homemade ice cream and cake and have hot dogs or hamburgers, whatever. We used to look forward for that day.
--Reverend Allen O. Smith

I remember her [the teacher] playing the piano. I remember her also being very firm. She had a yardstick (laughter). We all tried to avoid that, but sometimes, we didn't. She was very loving...almost like a mother type....I remember her having beautiful handwriting, it was beautiful, very distinct.
--Rebecca Freeman

At the end of school we had a program. Each child, if they wanted to participate, they could, in some kind of talent, maybe singing, reciting poetry, reading something that they liked. I remember the desks being pushed back to the walls, and the front of the school being decorated with all kinds of honeysuckles and roses....They were used as props at the front of the school, draped over the piano, the blackboard, and in the corners. Each child would be given a special recognition for something they had done during the year, maybe in art, that was really emphasized, or someone with beautiful handwriting, or someone talented in reading poetry....I think it was a wonderful experience for me in that we were free to express ourselves during this talent time. And I was a very quiet child so I kind of had to be encouraged and she encouraged everyone to try to do what you thought you could do, and I think that helped a lot.
--Rebecca Freeman

1. Were the progressive features of Iron Hill School successful? How can you tell?

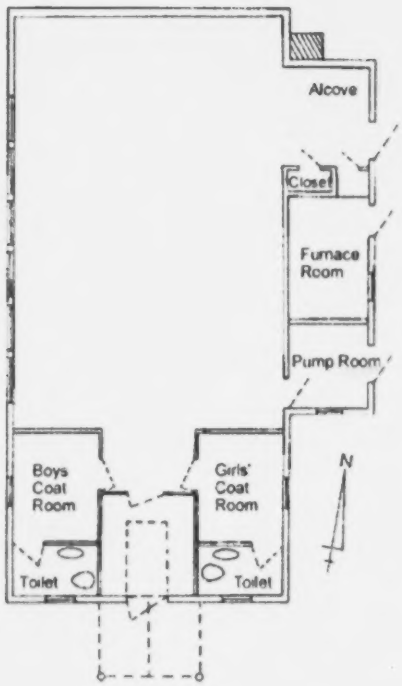
2. Reverend Allen O. Smith and Rebecca Freeman both attended the Iron Hill School, although they were there at different times. Based on the excerpts from their interviews, who do you think might have been a student there first? Explain your answer.

3. Like most rural schools of the time, one teacher was expected to teach six grades in one room. Based on the excerpts, how did teachers appear to manage this task?

4. What did you learn from the oral histories that you did not learn from the writings of du Pont and Betelle? What kinds of things did the former students recall? Whose perspective of the school is missing? Why might this be the case?

Teaching Activities - Visual Evidence

Photo 1: Iron Hill School



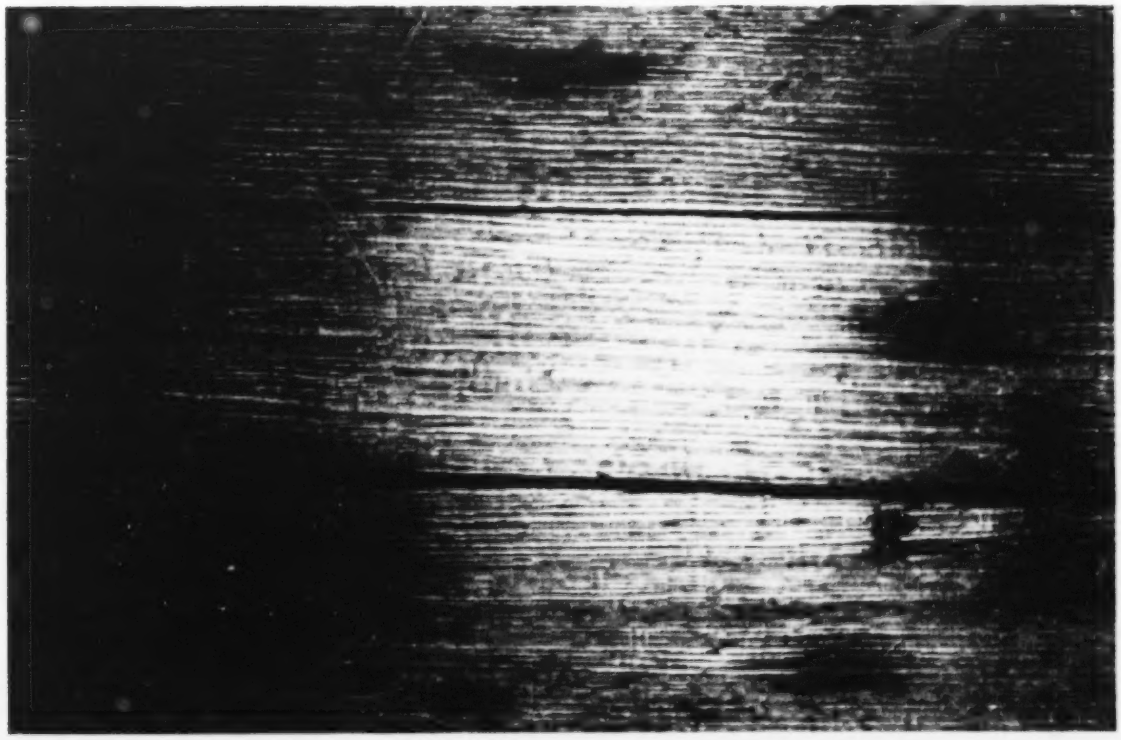
1) What evidence in the photo and plan indicates that this building was a progressive school? (You may want to refer back to Reading 2.)

2) What are the approximate overall dimensions of the classroom? How do these measurements compare with the recommended dimensions? How do they compare with your classroom? (You will need the high-quality version of the floor plan to complete this exercise.)

3) What are some similarities and differences between your school and Iron Hill?

Teaching Activities - Visual Evidence

Photo 2: Detail of Floor Boards, Iron Hill School



Document 1:
School Furniture Advertisement

To Educational Authorities
and
Custodians of School Properties

AMERICAN TUBULAR and PRESSED STEEL SCHOOL FURNITURE

AMERICAN SEATING COMPANY

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1) Consider how the photo and the advertisement relate to each other. The desk and chair in the upper left corner of the ad are the type found in the attic of Iron Hill school and remembered by a student who attended in 1937. The desk and chair found in the attic line up perfectly over holes that still exist in the floor boards where the desks and chairs were attached to the floor.

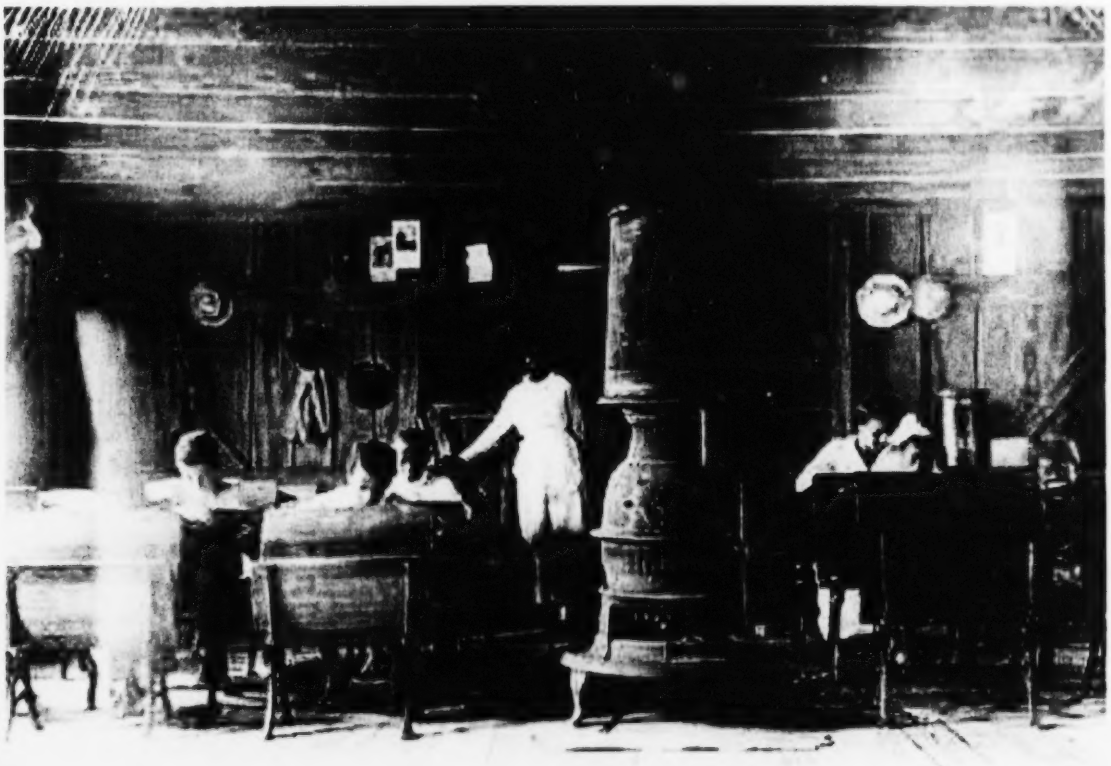
2) Reread the paragraph in Reading 2 on community uses of small schools. In his specifications for school equipment, Betelle called for "forty movable 'Moultrop' desks." Locate a Moultrop chair desk in the advertisement. (You will probably need the high quality version of the ad to find it.) A former Iron Hill student remembers that by 1949 the desks and chairs were moved around for special activities. This implies that Moultrop chair desks were used because they did not need to be fastened to the floor. How then might you account for the holes in the floor and the desk and chair found in the attic? Why might the school have replaced the desks and chairs?

3) How do the chairs and desks in the ad compare to those in your classroom and school auditorium?

4) What factor does the ad seem to stress most about the school furniture? Why?

Teaching Activities--Visual Evidence

Photo 3: Interior of an African-American School in Anthoston, Kentucky, built ca. 1875, photographed 1916.



1) Examine this photo carefully and write down several of your observations.

2) What can you learn about the time period from studying this photo? What can you learn about African-American schools in general? Can you infer anything about Iron Hill School from this photo? If so, what?

Putting It All Together

The Iron Hill School building continues to serve an educational purpose in its community as the Iron Hill Museum of Natural History. The following activities will help students understand the concept of philanthropy as well as begin to discover the history of their own school.

Activity 1: Researching Philanthropists

Ask students to consider what is meant by the words "philanthropy" and "philanthropist" and write down a definition for each. Then have them compare their definitions with those found in a dictionary. Next, have students choose a philanthropist (other than du Pont) who was active during the Progressive Era and write a short essay describing how that person fits the definition of a philanthropist. Finally, ask students to think of a contemporary philanthropist and compare their contribution to that of the person they researched from the Progressive Era.

Activity 2: Collecting Oral Histories

If possible, have students look at old yearbooks to discover the names of former students of their school who might still live in the area. Invite one or more of them to come to the class for an interview. Ask the class to prepare a list of questions that will help them discover what the typical school day was like at the time, what he/she remembers most about the time spent at the school, and any changes to the school building he/she notices. Choose one or two students to conduct the interview and have the entire class take notes. Then have each student write a newspaper article about the person(s) interviewed that illustrates the differences between the typical school day then and now and highlights how the school may have changed over the years. Read the articles to the class and have them vote on one article to be submitted to the school newspaper for publication. Finally, ask students to make a list of things they think they might remember and what objects they might save in case someone ever asks to interview them about their school days.

Activity 3: The History of Your School

Have students research their school to find out who designed the building, when it was built, and what conditions influenced the plan and the style. In some states, documentation about the construction of schools is located at the State Department of Education and the State Archives. In other states, the school district offices or the municipal library hold this information. Next, have them try to discover how the school building has been altered, adapted, and updated over time. Try to decide what ideals about education the architecture of their school reflects. Students should consider size, floor plan, kinds of classrooms, student and teacher facilities, etc. They should research the guidelines and specifications in effect at the time their school was built. How do those requirements differ from the progressive ideals used at the Iron Hill School?